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MAYYANG AND THE CRAB: A CINDERELLA VARIANT

Avelina Gil

Cinderella, the household drudge who outshines her better-dressed stepsisters and, despite their machinations, marries the prince - - who does not know Cinderella? Easily the best known folk heroine, she or analogues of her appear in folktales throughout the world, the earliest known version being a Chinese tale recorded in the ninth century A.D. Her story and variations of it turn up in folklore all over Europe as well as in India, Indonesia, the Zululand, Oceania, and among the American Indians (see Thompson 5:8); it is perhaps the most widespread *Märchen* in the world. There have been discovered 345 variants of the whole tale or of its main incidents among the medieval analogues alone (*Encyclopedia Americana,* 1966 ed., s.v. "Mythology").

What folklorists call the Cinderella tale is one of eight tales collected by Charles Perrault and first published in France in 1697. Thirty-two years later the book was translated into English by Robert Samber and published under the title *Tales of Mother Goose.* The outline of the story follows the reversal-of-fortune theme, although the motifs - - a motif being an object, a character, an intellectual formulation, or a dramatic situation which can recur in other themes, fragments, or transformations, as variants some of them unrecognizable as forms of earlier themes- - of the tale can and do vary; and indeed Perrault's version contains elements not found in earlier tales and omits elements found in older tales. Cinderella's godmother is, more often than not, a domesticated animal or a sea creature that turns out to be her mother in another shape. Or Cinderella goes to a festival or to church rather than to a ball, and what identifies her to the prince may not be a glass slipper but a golden shoe as in the Chinese tale, or a ring. Perrault invented the glass slipper and the twelve o'clock deadline for Cinderella (*Encyclopedia Americana,* 1966 ed., s.v. "Cinderella"); it is ironic that these two motifs are part of the "authentic" Cinderella tale although they are not of folk origin.

Since this folktale is so widespread, we would not expect Filipino children to be ignorant of the tale. Yet, when they come across the name Cinderella in literature classes, they ask: Who is Cinderella? They look bewildered, and the teacher shakes her head and deplores the system of education that fosters such "rank ignorance of classic literature." But when a quick synopsis of the story is given everyone starts exclaiming, "Ah, Maria and the prince! " or "Why, that Mayyang and the crab! " Everyone, it turns out, knows the tale but not the name Cinderella. Fansler, for example, records two stories, one Tagalog and the other Visayan, whose Cinderellas are named Maria and Abedeja, respectively (Fansler 314-319). Sister Maria Delia Coronel, who compiled another collection of Philippine folktales, records two Visayan Cinderella tales, using the names Mariang Isda and Perigrina instead of Cinderella (Coronel 124-128). In this paper, I shall deal with an Ilocano version of Mayyang, a nickname of Maria, as the heroine. It is not recorded in any journal or folktale collection as far as I am aware, and since it presents unique variants in some of its motifs, a comparative study of it and of the four other Cinderella tales already mentioned might prove interesting. Conjectures about the sources of the motifs in the tale may be made but they will be extremely hypothetical as any such conclusions about the sources of oral traditions are bound to be. As Haring asserts, "Historical evidence probably will never be obtained to settle many questions of origin, and it is unlikely that a single archetype of any widespread tale can be reconstructed and attributed positively to a specific people or area" (*Encyclopedia Americana,* 1966 ed., s.v. "Folklore").

G: Iloc. **Mayyang and the Crab**

This tale, hereafter referred to as G: Iloc.,

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was told to me in the nineteen-twenties. I have translated it freely into English from the Ilocano of my septuagenarian grandmother.

Long ago a rich woman had a beautiful daughter whom she loved very dearly. The girl's name was Mayyang. The rich woman also had a *comadre* who had two daughters named Sabel and Aca. Everyday the the *comadre* would go to the rich woman's house and say, "Ay, *Comare,* let's go to the river to bathe and I will shampoo your hair." And they'd go together to bathe and have a shampoo with *gogo* [native shampoo made out of burnt rice straw and mixed with water] and lime juice.

Then one day the *comare* pushed the rich woman into the deep part of the river and said, *"Ala,* [an exclamation for warning somebody] now you'll drown! " and then she went to her *comadre's* husband and said, "Ay, *Compare,* my *comare* fell into the river and drowned."

The husband began to weep. "What will happen to my daughter now? Who will cook our food and wash our clothes? "

The widow said, *"Compare,* don't break your head over that. I'll send you your meals and my daughters will wash your clothes everyday."

And for one week she took care of the food and the laundry of Mayyang and her father. In the end, the father said, "Ay, *Comare,* it's better if I marry you and you and your children come here to live. Then you'll not need to send food to us and come for our laundry."

"Yes, *Compare,"* answered the widow, smiling because that was exactly what she had wanted all along.

After the wedding she and her daughters moved into the house and made Mayyang work like a servant. She sent Mayyang to the river to wash all the laundry before breakfast and told her to wait for the clothes to dry there. As soon as Mayyang got home in the afternoon she had to cook supper and wait at the table. Very often there was nothing left for her to eat.

One day, when Mayyang was in the river crying because she was very hungry, she heard a voice behind her ask, *"Anakko,* [my child] why are you crying? " Surprised, she turned and was terrified to see a huge crab. But the crab continued, "Don't be afraid, Mayyang. I'm your mother. My wicked *comare* drowned me and I became a crab. Tell me, why do you cry? Maybe I can help you."

Mayyang gladly told the crab her woes and ended with, "And now I'm always hungry. How can I work? "

"Ala, Mayyang, I can help you. I'll bring you food everyday," promised the crab, and everyday she brought Mayyang fish and shrimp to cook, bananas and mangoes from trees that grew on the river banks, and even beans and green growing on the sandy river islands. And Mayyang stayed in the river as long as she could, playing with her mother who helped her with the wash

The stepmother wondered why Mayyang didn't grow thin and why she was so eager to leave in the morning. She told Sabel to spy on Mayyang.

The next day Sabel followed Mayyang to the river, and after an hour she came back to relate what she saw. "Mother, you'll not believe what I say. A big crab gave her food! She called it 'Mother.' It gave her a big trout and bisocol snails, edible snails found in rivers and rice fields and such juicy *carmay"* [a kind of tart fruit].

"Is that so? " said the stepmother, and that night she ordered Mayyang, "Tomorrow I want you to bring that crab for us to eat, else don't ever enter this house again."

How sad Mayyang was!

Next morning she went to the river sorrowfully and told her crab-mother about the stepmother's command. The Crab said to her, "Don't cry, *Anakko.* Do what she says. But do not eat a part of me, and after supper gather the pieces of broken shell and put them in a pot and bury the pot at the foot of the kitchen steps."

That's what Mayyang did, and a strange thing happened. The next day she found a tall coconut tree growing right where she had buried the pot. "Mother! " she said, embracing the tree trunk. Plop! a coconut dropped behind her, splitting when it fell, and Mayyang saw that it contained fried rice and *sang-cuchar* [a kind of stewed beef]. Joyfully she hid the coconut among her wash had left for the river. That evening she cheerfully washed the dishes and then sat at the backstairs to talk to her mother.

Everyday she had food to take with her, and again the stepmother wondered why Mayyang did not complain. "Aca," she said to her second daughter, "find out why Mayyang does not even grow thin."

And Aca spied on Mayyang and saw her bring along a coconut picked from under the tree at the foot of the backstairs. When Mayyang opened the nut in the river, there was delicious food enough for the whole day

Aca ran home to report what she had seen, and the stepmother said, "Is that so? " And that night, when Mayyang arrived, the stepmother told her, "Mayyang, tomorrow I want you to cut down that coconut tree at the backstairs. It is very dangerous to have it there. We

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might be hit by falling nuts."

Mayyang wept but she said nothing. She crept to the tree and said, "Mother, she wants me to cut you down. What shall I do? "

The tree answered, "*Anakko*, do what she says."

So the next morning Mayyang got a bolo and began to cut the tree down. The stepmother and the two daugthers stood by to watch. "Ah," they jeered, "cry all you can. You thought you could eat better food than we! " And they screwed up their eyes and laughed so hard that they didn't see the tree sway toward them as it began to fall. Crash! the tree fell right on them, and the wicked stepmother and her two bad daughters died instantly. Then the mother of Mayyang stepped out from inside the stump of the tree and embraced Mayyang and said, "Ay, *Anakko* Mayyang, we are happy together again! "

This story lacks that portion in Perrault's version, which tells of the prince's ball and also the identification or recognition motif which, of course, hinges on the ball motif. But "Mayyang and the Crab" presents a number of interesting items not found in Perrault's version as well as in other Filipino Cinderella tales, and before analyzing these variants, it is perhaps best to give the synopses of the Fansler and the the Coronel tales.

F:45-a. **Maria and the Golden Slippers**

A tale told by a Tagalog from Laguna and hereafter referred to as F:45-a (Fansler, 314-316).

When Maria was a little girl, her mother died, and her father married a widow with two daughters. They made Maria the servant and gave her rags to wear. One day Prince Malecadel invited all the ladies in the kingdom to a ball, for he wanted to choose a bride. Maria knew that she would not be allowed to go, and she wept as she washed the laundry in the river. But a crab which identified itself as Maria's mother came, asking why she was sad, and while Maria was telling the crab her woes, the stepmother came along and ordered Maria to get the crab and cook it for supper. The crab told Maria not to eat any of her meat and to bury the shell in the garden, and from the tree that would grow, she could ask anything. She followed the instructions, and from the tree that grew instantly, she got the gown for the prince's ball and golden slippers to wear . . .

At this point, the tale proceeds exactly as does Perrault's.

F:45-b. **Abedeja**

A Visayan tale from Leyte, hereafter referred to as F:45-b (Fansler, 316-318).

Abac's wife died when their daughter Abedeja was thirteen years old. In a year Abac married a widow with three daughters who all treated Abedeja like a servant. They ordered her to wash a black handkerchief white and a white handkerchief black, and when she was crying in the river, not knowing what to do, a beautiful woman appeared. She did the impossible, and the next day, she again helped Abedeja by fulfilling the day's task - - to repair a torn mat as good as new. The lady also gave Abedeja a chicken which the stepmother cooked for supper, leaving only the claws for Abedeja. She planted them in the forest and out grew a tree with gems and jewelry for fruit. The richest man in town found the tree, plucked a ring for himself, but when his finger swelled, he promised his son in marriage to the girl who could remove the ring. Abedeja did it, and thus she married the rich man's son; and the beautiful lady attended the wedding, invisible to all except to Abedeja.

The next two accounts that follow are the synopses of the Visayan tales in Sister Coronel's collection.

C:V23. **Mariang Isda - - Filipino Cinderella**

A Visayan tale, also from Leyte, hereafter referred to as C:V23 (Coronel, 124-126).

When Maria was twelve years old, her mother died, and her father married a young childless widow who made Maria her servant. One night Maria was scolded severely for breaking two spoons. She went out to the seashore to cry, and there a big fish stranded on the sand begged her to throw it into the sea. Maria did so, and the fish promised to repay her kindness. Maria and the fish became good friends although people who learned of the friendship thought her crazy and called her Mariang Isda (fish). Soon after she disappeared. Her father and the stepmother hunted for her, but she was never found. People thought her changed into a mer-

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maid; others thought her to have been taken away by the big fish.

This tale has only the Cinderella beginning, and at that, not too accurately since the widow is childless and has no daughters to compete with Maria for the favor of the prince. The second Coronel story is more nearly a Cinderella tale.

C:V24, Perigrina - - Filipino Cinderella

A tale from Bohol, hereafter referred to as C:V24 (Coronel, 126-128).

Nong Binoy, a widower who had to go traveling, solved the problem of leaving his lovely daughter Perigrina alone by marrying Anzat, a widow with two daughters, Pukay and Kikay. Treated by them as a servant, Perigrina would run to the seashore for refuge. One day a "motherly fish" offered to help her, and to do that, she told Perigrina to cook her for supper. Reluctantly Perigrina did so; then she collected all the fish bones and buried them in her garden. The next day a wonderful tree grew there, loaded with gems, jewelry, gowns, and shoes, each enclosed in transparent nuts. Anzat grabbed some fruit and was turned to stone. Pukay and Kikay immediately prostrated themselves before Perigrina and promised to reform. She forgave them and Anzat recovered her old self. Thereafter the four women lived together harmoniously.

The leitmotif of the Cinderella tale is the reversal of fortune - - or of misfortune, to be more accurate - - and the elements of the story are (1) the Cinderella setting, (2) the fairy godmother, (3) the prince's ball, and (4) the Cinderella ending. Each element is made up of several motifs.

This study will compare the Cinderella elements present in the two Fansler tales, the two Coronel tales, and my Ilocano tale by isolating the variant motifs in each element. An outline of the variants is given below:

(1) *The Cinderella setting.* This includes the motif which Thompson labels the "unpromising heroine" cross-referred to the "stepdaughter heroine" and to the "victorious youngest daughter" and the motif he identifies as "cruel stepmother" (Thompson 1:7; 6:748).

F:45-a. Mother dies when Maria is young; a few years later her father marries a widow with two daughters. Maria becomes their servant.

F:45-b. Mother dies when Abedeja is thirteen years old; a year later her father marries a widow with three daughters. They make Maria their servant.

C:V23. Mother dies when Maria is twelve years old; four years later the father marries a childless widow. She makes Maria her servant.

C:V24. Mother dies when Perigrina is young; soon after her father marries a widow with two daughters. They treat Perigrina as a maid.

G:Iloc. The *comadre* drowns Mayyang's mother; a week later her father marries the *comadre* who has two daughters. They treat Mayyang as their servant.

It is the Cinderella setting which, with the *peripeteia,* identifies the Cinderella tale. It is noteworthy that in the first four tales, the mother dies a natural death; while in the Ilocano tale, the mother is done to death and the father marries the most logical suspect with no one finding anything strange about the whole affair. Neither do the people consider the marriage at all hasty or indelicate. But of course, logic is often least expected in a folktale. However, one can theorize and explain the matter-of-factness of the drowning-variant by saying that it is an insert to the original tale and it cannot disturb the rest of the story. Could this insert have been an influence of American folksongs and folktales - - "Clementine" perhaps, or Sweet Alice in "Ben Bolt"? Such songs were taught to grade school pupils early in the century. On the other hand, murdering a rival to get a man is not beyond a calculating widow, Ilocano though she be!

(2) *The fairy godmother.* This refers to a benevolent supernatural being whose origin and powers vary widely among tales.

F:45-a. The supernatural being takes the form of a wonderful tree that grows out of the bones of a crab

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which has identified itself as Maria's mother. The tree outfits Maria for the prince's ball.

F:45-b. The supernatural being is dual: first, a beautiful lady who inexplicably performs the tasks of Abedeja, and a wonderful tree that grows out of the chicken claws. A ring from the tree causes to swell the finger on which it is worn.

C:V23. The supernatural being is a talking fish that becomes Mariang Isda's confidante.

C:V24. The supernatural being is a wonderful tree that grows out of the bones of a talking fish which, also inexplicably, forces Perigrina to cook it for supper. The nuts of the tree can cause petrification.

G:Iloc. The supernatural being is a wonderful coconut tree which grows out of the crab shells. The crab is Mayyang's mother drowned by Mayyang's stepmother. The tree gives cooked food to Mayyang.

Thompson describes a "magic tree" as one with a silver trunk, gold branches, emerald leaves, and pearl fruit (Thompson 3:215), clearly one of the trees in Aladdin's cave. Thompson does not record any tree similar to those in the tales above. Rusk identifies these trees as a "wonderfull tree" (see Fansler, 318), its fruit being not only gems but jewelry, clothes, and shoes. The fruit may or may not have magic powers; the nuts in C:V24 cause Perigrina no harm, but her stepmother is turned to stone by them. Leper's Island among the Oceanic Islands has a tale about a coconut tree supplying inexhaustible food (see Thompson 2:129), but it does not supply food all cooked and ready to eat, as in G:Iloc.

The two tasks in F:45-b are interesting variants of the "impossible task" motif of fairy tales and hero tales. A variant of washing a white handkerchief black and vice versa is found in a tale I read in the 'twenties, entitled "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon." Unfortunately I cannot supply the source of the tale.

The "helpful crab" motif has been recorded both in Africa among the Mpongwe and in India; the "crab changed from woman" motif appears in New Guinea as a whole but only the Papuans have a tale of a man changed into a crab (see Thompson 1:441; 2:24). It is intriguing why the crab motif does not appear in European tales; instead, the supernatural figure often takes the form of a cow, a goat, or a pig, or, as in C:V23 and C:V24, a fish. (*Encyclopedia Americana,* 1966 ed., s. v. "Cinderella").

In the G:Iloc, tale, one might ascribe the use of a huge crab to the fact that among the Ilocanos, crabs are a delicacy and even now when refrigeration is possible, they still are very expensive. Thus, it would be natural for a housewife to want a crab for supper, and hence, the motivation for changing the mother into a crab. Yet such causality may be too sophisticated for folklore.

(3) *The prince's ball.* This element comprises the "bride-search" motif, the "home by midnight" motif, and the "glass slipper" motif.

F:45-a. This tale follows the Cinderella plot accurately except for the use of a golden, not glass, slipper.

F:45-b. The richest man in town picks a ring off the wonderful tree; his finger swells, and he promises to marry off his son to the girl who can remove the ring.

C:V23. This element is not in the tale. Mariang Isda merely disappears.

C:V24. Anzat, the stepmother, grabs the fruit and is changed into stone.

G: Iloc. This element is not in the tale.

The prince's ball triggers the *peripeteia,* or sudden and unexpected reversal of circumstances, wherein Cinderella's undeserved misery is "rewarded." Considering that the "home by midnight motif and the "glass slipper" motif are perhaps inventions by Perrault, it is not surprising that of the five tales under study, only one presents the prince's ball element. The use of a golden slipper rather than a glass one is perhaps due to the influence of the ninth-century Chinese tale which uses a golden shoe in the "bride-search" motif. The use of a ring in F:45-b follows a popular folklore motif of "ring-identification," although such a motif generally uses a ring previously agreed upon as an identity-ring. The nut in C:V24 is an interesting variant. Remotely, it may be a throwback to the Biblical story of Lot, or to the Medusa story, or to Midas' golden touch. In all

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these tales, being petrified is a punishment visited upon the wrong-doer.

(4) *The Cinderella ending.* This element is made up of the "search for the owner" motif with Cinderella being prevented from trying her luck as part of the motif. This element also includes the "marriage with prince" motif and the "stepmother" motif insofar as her fate is concerned.

F:45-a. This tale follows the Cinderella tale accurately.

F:45-b. Abedeja touches the ring and it slides off. She marries the rich man's son and lives with him away from her stepmother and stepsisters.

C:V23. The tale does not have the Cinderella ending. Mariang Isda's father and stepmother hunt for her in vain.

C:V24. Perigrina does not marry anyone in the tale. Her petrified stepmother becomes human when Perigrina forgives her stepsisters, and Anzat, Pukay, and Kikay promise to become good and kind.

G: Iloc. Mayyang does not get a husband in the tale. Her stepmother and stepsisters are killed and Mayyang recovers her loving mother.

The Cinderella ending is the reversal of Cinderella's fortune, that is, the poor drudge becomes a prince's bride and her former tormentors humble themselves before her. This happens in F:45-a, but in F:45-b a rich man's son rather than a prince suffices for Abedeja. In the last three tales, however, mere relief from suffering and the acquisition of love and sympathy are sufficient compensation for the heroine's suffering. Indeed, in C:V23 and in G: Iloc. the stepmother and the stepsisters do not actually humble themselves at all, but the Cinderella analogues are presumably content.

The study made thus far, brief as it is, merely corroborates what is apparent: The Cinderella tale is so widespread that the Philippines has three variant within the Visayan area alone. It agrees with past studies that a fish or a crab is a variants used for the fairy godmother and that in Filipino folklore a wonderful tree is not only loaded with gems but also with clothing and food. Thirdly, this study re-affirms that the Cinderella tale is, indeed, a *Märchen,* pure fiction that seems to have no other intention than to amuse and interest, but its origin among the lower orders of society is indicated by the fact that the tale centers on the successes of a downtrodden servant girl unable to assert her rights. Thus might a Visayan fisherman's wife daydream about a big fish that releases her and her family from poverty and toil; thus might an Ilocano farmer's wife indulge in wishful thinking and gain imaginative compensation in a story of ready-cooked food freely given by a tree with an extensive menu!

But if this study does not elicit anything new regarding the Cinderella tale, it does reveal certain sociological facets of Filipino life, one of which is that the stepmother is the queen in her household. The husband does not - - cannot - - dare object to the way his children are treated by his second wife, even though he is the breadwinner and the stepdaughter being exploited is his only child. In fact, even though his concern over his only daughter may have motivated his second marriage, as in C:V23 and G:Iloc., he does not interfere if his wife takes advantage of her and makes a servant out of her. Perhaps he does not realize his daughter's predicament, and she knows only too well that she cannot run to him to tell on her stepmother; and if he does know thestate of affairs in his house, he also is aware that to take his daughter's side against his new wife would be to take his peace and well-being in his own hands.

Another facet of Filipino life revealed by this study is highly interesting: The reversal of fortunes from misfortune does not necessarily mean the acquisition of wealth, social standing, or a husband. Not one of the Cinderella analogues uses the gems to placate the cruel stepmother, or to enhance her value as a prospective bride, or to buy her way into society. She does not seem to realize the power of diamonds and gold! What we the readers realize is that to her, "good fortune" means peace and harmony in her household. With that a Filipino wife is content. A prince or a rich man for a husband is fine, but implied in all the tales in this study is the fact that the Filipino woman in the barrio and on the farms will settle for a kind and understanding household where members are

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mutually helpful and loving. That harmony is her pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; it will do for a fairy prince; it is reason for her to live happily ever after.

To the modern urban wife locked with spiraling costs and contending with the hectic pace of day-to-day living, such content belongs to the *Märchen* - -pure fiction that, alas, is nothing but a "fish story," the *Märchen* that is only too truly a fairy tale!

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